

Message Text

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TO SECSTATE WASHDC 9709

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C O N F I D E N T I A L DACCA 0804

E.O. 11652: GDS

TAGS: PINT, BG

SUBJECT: THREE MUJIBITES ARRESTED: MARTYRS DAY APPROACHES

1. THREE SUPPORTERS OF THE LATE SHEIKH MUJIBUR RAHMAN HAVE BEEN ARRESTED BY THE MARTIAL LAW ADMINISTRATION, APPARENTLY AS AN OUTGROWTH OF PREPARATIONS FOR OBSERVING "EKUSHEY FEBRUARY," THE FEBRUARY 21 ANNIVERSARY OF THE BEGINNING OF THE BENGALI LANGUAGE MOVEMENT IN 1952. THOSE ARRESTED ARE FORMER MINISTER MATIUR RAHMAN; KHONDOKAR MOHAMMED ELIAS, JOURNALIST AND APOLOGIST FOR MUJIB LONG ASSOCIATED WITH NAP/MAZAFFAR; AND ONE NURUJAL ISLAM, BELIEVED TO BE AN AWAMI LEAGUE PARTY WORKER. A HOME MINISTRY PRESS NOTICE OF FEBRUARY 14 SAID THAT THE THREE MEN WERE ARRESTED UNDER THE SPECIAL POWERS ACT FOR "INDULGING IN ACTIVITIES PREDJUDICIAL TO THE SECURITY AND PUBLIC SAFETY OF BANGLADESH." THE ARRESTS WERE ACCOMPANIED BY A LENGTHY, UNEQUIVOCAL GOVERNMENT WARNING THAT ACTIVITIES ON FEBRUARY 21 MUST NOT BE USED FOR "PARTISAN PURPOSES OR POLITICAL GAIN."

2. THE ARRESTS TEND TO CONFIRM THE IMPRESSION THAT FEBRUARY 21 WAS SHAPING UP TO BE PERHAPS THE FIRST DOMESTIC POLITICAL CONFRONTATION FOR THE MARTIAL LAW
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REGIME SINCE THE CHALLENGE OF THE JATIYO SAMAJTANTRIK

DAL (JSD) IN NOVEMBER. THERE HAS BEEN A PROLIFERATION OF COMMITTEES SET UP TO OBSERVE THE DAY, WITH ANTI-INDIAN LEFTISTS OF THE NAP/BHASHANI AND HOLIDAY STRIKE THE MOST ACTIVE. BUT THE GROUP HEADED BY MOHAMMED ELIAS CAUSED A MILD FUROR. COMMITTEE MEMBERS LISTED IN A PAID ADVERTISEMENT IN ITTEFAQ FEBRUARY 12 READ LIKE A WHO'S WHO OF THE AWAMI LEAGUE AND NAP/MUZAFFAR; THE SIXTY-SIX NAMES LISTED INCLUDED 14 FORMER CABINET AND STATE MINISTERS (INCLUDING MATIUR RAHMAN) AND MOST OF THE NAP/M HIERARCHY. THE COMMITTEE LIST IS A SURPRISING ONE IN SOME RESPECTS. PEOPLE ARE INCLUDED WHO ARE NOT KNOWN AS STRONG SUPPORTERS OF MUJIB, PARTICULARLY DURING HIS LAST YEAR IN POWER. OTHERS ON THE LIST WHO WERE CLOSELY IDENTIFIED WITH MUJIB AND HAVE FEARED THE CONSEQUENCES OF SUCH ASSOCIATION HAVE BEEN LEADING VERY QUIET LIVES OF LATE; IT IS DOUBTFUL THAT THEY WOULD WILLINGLY DRAW ATTENTION TO THEMSELVES THROUGH SUCH PUBLICITY.

3. THUS THERE IS CONFUSION OVER THE PURPOSES OF THE COMMITTEE ORGANIZERS AND THE EXTENT OF THEIR REAL SUPPORT. WHAT IS CLEAR IS THAT THE GOVERNMENT HAS READ THEIR INTENTIONS AS POTENTIALLY EMBARRASSING, AND, THEREFORE, JAILED THE THREE. THE MLA MAY HAVE BEEN PROMPTED BY WHAT WE HEAR ARE SOMEWHAT PROVOCATIVE LEAFLETS BEING CIRCULATED IN THE COMMITTEE'S NAME AND CALLING FOR A RESURGENCE OF THE AWAMI LEAGUE. THE ARRESTS WERE PROBABLY INTENDED TO DAMPEN THE ENTHUSIASM OF OTHER MUJIBITIES WHO MIGHT WISH TO ATTEMPT A SHOW OF STRENGTH ON FEBRUARY 21.
BOSTER

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